

What's going on

To prevent the sexual exploitation of children and young people

An interim report

Special edition – the story so far...

This special edition of the What's Going On? newsletter reports on what we have found to be happening in LSCBs across the country in response to child sexual exploitation.

The data from initial questionnaires completed by over a hundred LSCBs give an indication of the level of response in England¹:

- there are 29 sexual exploitation coordinators in posts across the country – representing fewer than a quarter of LSCBs
- there are current protocols in operation in less than a quarter of LSCBs
- there are sub groups addressing sexual exploitation in just over a quarter of LSCBs
- there is a specialist project in just a quarter of LSCB areas
- ten years on from the introduction of a dual strategy of protecting young people and proactively investigating their abusers, a third of the country has no plans for the delivery of such a strategy

The role of LSCBs

The research project is based on an exploration of how LSCBs are fulfilling their coordinating role and responsibilities with regard to delivering a child sexual exploitation strategy, set out in the guidance on *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation*, published last year².

The guidance was developed with advice from children's charities, practitioners from a range of agencies with significant expertise in this area, and based on research and evaluation of effective practice. It is practical guidance to help the police, teachers, social workers, health workers and all those who work closely with young people to respond to the particular challenge of identifying children at risk of sexual exploitation, to take steps to protect them, and to take action against perpetrators.

Guidance, guidance, guidance

There is an understandable resistance to an ever-increasing number of guidance documents. However, in this case, the revised and updated guidance had been long awaited and was widely welcomed by practitioners looking for practical help to address this area of child protection. It is a challenging issue and we know that progress has been slow:

- in 2002, two years after the publication of the original guidance, less than 10% of areas were delivering a dual approach of protecting young people and proactively investigating their abusers³
- in 2008, many areas still reported that they were 'just starting out'⁴
- today just under a third of areas appear to be delivering the dual strategy.

What hope for the impact of the guidance?

Its arrival coincided with an era in which, following the tragic cases of first Victoria Climbié and then Peter Connelly, child protection had been firmly focussed on young children in the home suffering from abuse and neglect. This has severely squeezed the resources available to respond to risky behaviour outside the home, and particularly to focus on the needs of older children.

Less than a year after the publication of the guidance, local authorities are facing severe cuts to services. Local partnerships are grappling with the unenviable task of prioritising their activities. Already we are receiving disturbing reports of threats to funding in this area. One of the most effective and well respected projects in the country has been one of the first casualties.

Yet sexual exploitation is also a child protection issue and those suffering serious harm in exploitative relationships are equally deserving of a child protection response.

But there are positives to report too. Although the findings indicate slow progress, they do show increased activity – and there are a number of areas in which very strong practice has been developed and an effective strategy is well established. The summer of 2010 has seen considerable media focus on child sexual exploitation following the prosecutions of Aftab Khan and eight other men for crimes related to the sexual exploitation of a girl aged 14 from Rochdale. A number of other cases are also before the courts following police operations investigating child sexual exploitation.

The best and the rest

It seems to be a case of 'the best and the rest.' Those working in areas delivering a developed child sexual exploitation strategy – police officers, social workers, specialist workers from the voluntary sector and other practitioners – believe this type of abuse to be serious and widespread. As signalled in the 2009 guidance: *'sexual exploitation is not limited to a particular geographical area and all LSCBs should assume that it is an issue in their area.'* But can the guidance succeed in accelerating progress towards the delivery of a child sexual exploitation strategy in all areas of the country? How can we ensure that the rest benefit from the expertise of the best? The research project aims to assist local areas to develop the tools needed to respond to local concerns and local circumstances. We aim to help local areas to make it a priority to protect children and young people who face the kind of horrific abuse experienced by a 14 year old girl in Rochdale.

¹ See section on **The Research project** for how these figures have been determined
² Department for Children, Families and Schools (2009) *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation: Supplementary guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children*, London: DCSF (available from www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications)
³ Swann, S & Balding, V (2002) *Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution: Guidance Review*, London: Department of Health
⁴ Jago, S and Pearce, J (2008) *Gathering evidence of the sexual exploitation of children and young people: a scoping exercise*, Luton: University of Bedfordshire (available from cara.senouni@beds.ac.uk)

The research project

This special edition newsletter reflects on the findings from the first stage of a research project, funded by Comic Relief and the University of Bedfordshire, which is exploring the way in which the 2009 guidance is being implemented.

Partnership with practitioners

The partnership between the research project team, based at the International Centre for the Study of Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Young People at the University of Bedfordshire, and the National Working Group for sexually exploited young people (NWG) has been crucial to the research. The NWG is an umbrella body for practitioners working in this field which enables them to share experiences and good practice. The relationship between the project team and the NWG has enabled the research to benefit from the expertise of practitioners from across the country.

Developing the picture

The project team asked the 144 Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) in England to provide basic information on their local child sexual exploitation strategies. Data supplied by over 100 areas (70% of the total) has provided a good indication of what is (and what is not) going on.

The limitations of collecting data through a brief questionnaire mean that, although correlations can be shown, it is not possible to demonstrate cause and effect. However, interesting possible associations have been suggested and will be explored more fully in the next stage of the research.

An important assumption was made with regard to the key findings from this part of the project. That assumption is that

little activity is taking place in those areas from whom the project team received no data. This assumption has been made on the basis that:

- significant efforts were made, involving multiple approaches to each area, to obtain the data. This effectively rules out administrative oversight
- the data was checked with service information held by the National Working Group – the lack of NWG data on the same areas tends to support the assumption that there is little safeguarding or police activity specifically aimed at addressing child sexual exploitation
- LSCB websites were checked – again, there was no evidence of any significant targeted activity was taking place, further supporting the assumption.

The research team will continue to explore activity in the 'non-responder' areas to explore that assumption and, where necessary, to refine the findings.

The next stage

An in-depth study of a number of established and developing child sexual exploitation strategies, will be undertaken through the autumn/winter 2010/11 to make a more detailed exploration of the data and to enable the project team to develop models of intervention, a training strategy and, for the first time, a means of measuring the number of children and young people suspected or known to be sexually exploited.

What's going on to establish effective partnerships?

As with so many issues that have an impact on health, education, family life and other areas of a child's life, a multi-faceted response is needed by children and young people at risk of or experiencing child sexual exploitation. The 2009 guidance recognises that child sexual exploitation is a shared responsibility, depending on *'effective joint working between different agencies and professionals that work with children and young people ... their full involvement is vital if children and young people are to be effectively supported and action is to be taken against perpetrators of sexual exploitation.'*⁵ The first set of data focusses on infrastructure and organisational activity undertaken to develop a partnership approach to implementing the 2009 guidance:

Developing protocols

Most areas reported that they had developed a protocol or were in the process of doing so. However, over half the areas with a protocol in place had not yet reviewed them following the publication of the 2009 guidance. If it is assumed that those areas who did not provide data are unlikely to have protocols, and that protocols will be outdated in areas that have not conducted a review, **less than a quarter of LSCBs in England are found to have current and specific protocols to address child sexual exploitation.**

Establishing sub groups

A third of areas providing data had set up a relevant sub group to drive forward work on child sexual exploitation, and a further third planned to do so or to extend the remit of an existing sub group. The remaining third had no plans to do so. On the assumption that there is no such activity in areas that did not provide any data, this would mean that **active sub groups are in place in little more than a quarter of LSCBs in England.**

Identifying lead professionals

Less than half of areas that provided data had identified lead professionals specifically in relation to child sexual exploitation. In some of those areas, this was restricted to a couple of agencies (most commonly the police and children's services). Assuming that lead professionals have not been identified in areas that had not provided data, **this aspect of the guidance has been implemented in a limited way in fewer than a third of LSCBs in England.**

Appointing a coordinator

Coordinators had been appointed in less than a third of the areas providing data and, assuming that there are no such posts in areas not providing data, less than a quarter of LSCBs in England. Perhaps even more worryingly, **64 areas of those providing data had no plans to appoint a coordinator.**

What's going on to recognise child sexual exploitation?

Partnerships are crucial to the delivery of an effective child sexual exploitation strategy. Correlations between the data suggest that these issues, and particularly the existence of a specific protocol, are influential in the delivery of key aspects of a local child sexual exploitation strategy. It is disturbing that these roles and responsibilities have not been more widely implemented.

The next stage of the research project will explore the apparent associations between these organisational issues and the delivery of other aspects of the strategy, and will aim to deliver outcomes – including a database of protocols and other key documents – that can be drawn upon locally to help to strengthen partnership working.

A key element of an effective child sexual exploitation strategy is the identification of those at risk, and those intent on their abuse. Models of exploitation, particularly grooming over the internet and grooming by individuals who purport to be 'older boyfriends', have been well publicised by the Child Exploitation and On Line Protection service (CEOP)⁶ and Barnardos⁷. It is also widely understood that particularly vulnerable young people, including those in care or in chaotic family homes, and those who regularly go missing from home or care, are targeted by such abusers.

However, members of the National Working Group have been reporting different models of late and are increasingly concerned about the targeting by mobile phone (sometimes using Bluetooth technology) in which young people are bombarded with messages from men they do not know. There is also increasing awareness – and concern – about pressure from peers and involvement with gangs. Models of exploitation can also be linked to activities – including the targeting of under 18 activities – and places. These 'hotspots' vary from place to place – taxi ranks, fast food outlets, newsagents, shopping malls – but can be anywhere where young people congregate without adult supervision.

The bank of knowledge is growing yet many practitioners still describe child sexual exploitation as 'a hidden issue'⁸. It is crucial that professionals with direct contact with young people be aware of risk indicators, and of the way in which young people can be manipulated and pressurised, so that those at risk can be identified as early as possible. This knowledge that can be used to help young people – and those who care for them – to become more resilient.

Just over half the areas providing data to the project reported that they were raising awareness with professionals. However, the format varied considerably, from formal training to the provision of basic information on websites. Considerably fewer areas reported the provision of activities to raise awareness with young people or their parents/carers. Raising awareness with professionals is one aspect of the strategy that appears to have an association with the organisational factors outlined above, although raising awareness with young people and their parents or carers is also significantly influenced by the existence of a specialist project (see below). These apparent associations will be explored in the second phase of the research project and tools developed to spread good practice.

What's going on to respond to concerns about child sexual exploitation?

A key element of an effective child sexual exploitation strategy is the ability to intervene as early as possible when a child or young person is identified as at risk or concerns expressed that he or she may be experiencing sexual exploitation. This is a major challenge to many practitioners working to high thresholds set on the basis of limited resources⁹, and where priority may be focussed on protecting young children in the home.

Protecting those at risk of exploitation

The identification or appointment of a coordinator has been shown to be a significant step to ensure that practitioners know how and where to report concerns and to instil confidence that reports will receive a coordinated response¹⁰. With a coordinator and lead professionals in place it is possible to ensure that the response includes health, education and other services that a child or young person may need to reduce their vulnerability to exploitation. It is important that this practical support is in place alongside a strategy that includes both child protection measures and the proactive disruption and investigation of potential abusers. However, the findings demonstrate that many areas have yet to address these organisational issues, and a significant number have no plans to do so.

LSCBs also provided data on the provision of specialist services, either from within statutory services or from the voluntary sector. Only 38 areas of England provided information on a service that was planned, or in place. Nearly half of the areas providing data had no plans for such a service. Again, if we assume that this is also the case in areas that did not provide data, then we must conclude that three quarters of the country has no plans for a specialist service. Given the need for flexible, intensive and long-term support, this finding is very disturbing. In the second phase of the project we will explore the role of specialist workers and the role that they play in the support of young people.

Disrupting exploitation and prosecuting abusers

This was an area of particular concern following the evaluation of the 2000 guidance and led to the commissioning of the research on gathering evidence¹¹. That report found that many areas were 'just starting out.' LSCBs were asked specifically about this aspect of the strategy. It is known that police operations are taking place in several areas of the country. However, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. While a third of areas stated that they were active in this area, another third had no plans to develop this aspect of the strategy. One area commented that this lack of activity 'was a long standing concern.'

⁶ www.thinkuknow.co.uk

⁷ Barnardos (1998) *Whose Daughter Next? Children Abused Through Prostitution*, London: Barnardos

⁸ Pearce, Jenny J (2009) *Young people and sexual exploitation: "its not hidden, you just aren't looking."* Abingdon: Routledge

⁹ Jago, S and Pearce, J (2008) *Gathering evidence of the sexual exploitation of children and young people: a scoping exercise*, Luton: University of Bedfordshire (available from cara.senouni@beds.ac.uk)

¹⁰ as above

¹¹ as above

⁵ Department for Children, Families and Schools (2009) *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation: Supplementary guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children*, London: DCSF (available from www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications)

What's going on

with the next stage of the research?

Developing models of intervention

In the second phase of the research project interviews will be undertaken with practitioners in sampled areas. These interviews will explore local activity to identify good practice and the data will be used to inform the development of models of intervention so that good practice can be spread across the country.

Data will also be collated from focus groups with practitioners in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Developing a training strategy

Another outcome for the research project is to develop a training strategy based on existing good practice, and the need of practitioners as identified through phase 2 of the project. As a basic guide to the extent of training, questions to LSCBs were included in the initial questionnaire. This indicated that significant numbers of the areas were providing training on identification, on protecting young people, and on gathering evidence (a surprising finding given the lack of proactive police investigations suggested by data elsewhere in the questionnaire). The second phase of the project will explore the nature and frequency of the training.

Developing a data collection system

The guidance¹² advises that we must assume that child sexual exploitation is taking place everywhere. However, the initial questionnaire showed that few data are collected locally. The research project is working with a number of LSCB areas to trial a data collection system which would enable local areas to monitor the local situation and would also contribute to the development of a national picture of the nature and prevalence of child sexual exploitation.

Keeping in touch with the research project

There are opportunities for LSCBs to be involved in the second phase of the project (in depth interviews with practitioners) and with the data collection trials. LSCBs, their partner agencies and other practitioners working in this field, can keep in touch with the project through the newsletter. The newsletter will also keep practitioners in touch with seminars and other events.

For further information on this project, or to be put on the mailing list of the project newsletter, please contact the project manager, Sue Jago (sue.jago@beds.ac.uk)



For information on services and other practical information, contact the National Working Group www.nwg.org.uk



Details of training and other useful information, can be found on the website of the Child Exploitation and On-Line Protection service www.thinkuknow.co.uk

Other useful information and resources are available from:
NSPCC – www.nspcc.org.uk
Barnardos – www.barnardos.org.uk



¹² Department for Children, Families and Schools (2009) *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation: Supplementary guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children*, London: DCSF (available from www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications)